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AUTHOR Fisher, Peter J. L.; Shapiro, Sheila
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ABSTRACT

A study examined how some teachers, in a graduate class, experienced literature study and began to explore ways of using it with their pupils. Subjects, 24 graduate students (9 secondary school teachers and 15 elementary teachers) enrolled in a class on the reading/writing connection, were randomly assigned to 6 groups of 4 students each. Each group read one book about the westward expansion of the United States in four sessions over a two-week period. Discussion sessions were audiotaped and analyzed. Students kept response logs, and after the last class, students completed a survey. Results indicated that: (1) subjects learned about the use of literature and cooperative groups in the classroom; (2) their exposure to literature led to an understanding of the possibilities for its use in social studies; (3) they learned how personal response to literature can be a powerful motivator for reading and learning; (4) role assignments and particular tasks seemed to contribute to literature discussions for these student teachers; (5) they adopted stances to the books which showed their personal involvement with the stories, understanding of characters, events, and themes, the author's craft, and the book as an object in relation to other sources of historical information; and (6) the only disturbing issue was the low frequency with which a critical stance was adopted. Findings suggest that teachers can develop their own literary knowledge in such a way as to be able to extend their students' understandings. (Twenty-four references, a description of the roles of group members, a list of daily procedures, and annotations of the six books used in the class are attached.) (RS)

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# TEACHERS' EXPLORATIONS OF HISTORICAL FICTION IN LITERATURE DISCUSSION GROUPS

Peter J.L. Fisher
National-Louis University

Sheila Shapiro
Northeastern Illinois University

Paper presented at the
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# TEACHERS' EXPLORATIONS OF HISTORICAL FICTION IN LITERATURE DISCUSSION GROUPS

Teachers who begin to use children's literature in their reading programs and in other areas of the curriculum are faced with a bewildering array of decisions as to how and when it may be most appropriately introduced. If they examine professional texts or journals for information, they can discover a wide variety of strategies that can be used to develop pupils' understanding of literature, ranging from techniques that focus on story structure and character development to those that encourage comparisons between one piece of literature and another (Cullinan, 1987; Bromley, 1990). They will also find that other teachers interpret a literature-based curriculum in differing ways in terms of classroom organization (Zarillo, 1989; Hiebert & Colt, 1989). Walmsley and Walp (1989) report that while teachers felt the inclusion of literature in the elementary school curriculum was important, they had difficulty articulating its role. This study examines how some teachers, in a graduate class, experienced literature study and began to explore ways of using it with their pupils.

Our experiences in teaching teachers had suggested that many of them had never themselves been involved in talking about literature. It seemed paramount, therefore, that such an opportunity be provided in class. Marshall (1989) argues that

> ...talking about literature in school may provide students

> with knowledge about literature. But it will also provide knowledge about the appropriate ways of talking about literature -- about the language, questions, and responses that are legitimate or conventional and those that are less so. Classroom discussion of literature, in other words, may represent a tacit curriculum in appropriate modes of literary response -- a curriculum about which we know very little. (p.1)

By talking about literature, we hoped our teachers would learn about possibilities for using it in the classroom, not just in terms of particular techniques, but also in terms of attitudes and appreciation of literature. Zancanella (1991) argued that teachers' own experiences and interactions with literature affect how they teach it to students. Moreover, since literature is often a motivating force for students' learning, and a means of students' gaining insights that might otherwise be lost, we hoped our teachers would benefit similarly.

As students interact with literature they may adopt different stances towards it. A commonly drawn distinction is that between reader's responses that are aesthetic and those that are efferent (Rosenblatt, 1978). Many (1991) found that students who took an aesthetic stance, where readers focused on the "lived-through experiences" of the work, developed higher levels of personal understanding than those whose stance was efferent. These latter readers focused on information to be taken from the text, and tended to respond at the literal level to stories. In addition to

stance, other factors such as age, sex , and the nature of the literary selection have been found to impact on response types (Purves, 1973). Recent work in reader-response theory in literary criticism has paralleled that of schema theory in educational research, where there has been an increased understanding of how reader-based factors influence understanding of text. Literature discussion groups have been found to develop all levels of reading comprehension through negotiating meaning (Golden, 1986: Eeds & Wells, 1989) where members of the group may take and "model" different stances. As Langer (1989) points out, approaches toward reading are functionally driven, so the stance taken can relate to the purpose for which the selection is being read. We wanted our teachers to explore literature from different stances in order to develop a greater understanding of the possible experiences their own students could have. We decided, therefore, to use cooperative reading groups, in which differing roles were assigned, in an attempt to develop a range of responses.

Cooperative groups have been used in various areas of the curriculum, and with some success for literature study in elementary classrooms (Fisher, Blachowicz, & Smith, 1990). Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1986) have argued that cooperative learning groups promote participation, and can be used with any academic task. Our own students have told us that working in cooperative groups, where each group member is assigned a different task, has helped them approach a book from different perspectives. We wanted to examine this further -- that is, to see how purpose for reading

(task in a cooperative group) impacted on stance and response.

Cooperative groups can provide a structure for discussion in a classroom where the teacher is willing to give up some control to the students. Marshall (1989) found literature discussion to be dominated by teacher questioning and teacher directed talk. Our own observations of teachers and children in cooperative literature discussion groups have suggested that while the grouping allows participants more freedom, sometimes discussion may be confined by the role assignments rather than encouraged by it. We also wanted to examine, therefore, if and when role assignments interfered with open discussion of the book.

Since our expectation was that a range of responses would be encouraged through the use of cooperative groups, when we examined the data we needed to adopt a classification system that would reflect that range of responses. Rosenblatt's (1978) distinction between aesthetic and efferent responses did not seem sufficient for our purposes. Applebee's developmentally based system (1978) did not seem appropriate for use with only adult subjects. Langer (1989) describes four major stances taken by high school students in relation to texts, but while her description of the process of literary understanding matches our own observations and experiences closely, we felt that it was less helpful for teachers in explicating ways in which students might be encouraged to interact with texts. From this perspective, Milner's classification (1989) seemed most appropriate to our needs. He argues that when teaching literature classes, teachers can encourage four stages in reading

literature. The first is that of being a reader, where the purpose is entertainment, and the primary task is to read. This stage most closely corresponds to an aesthetic response, where the reader is carried into another world before beginning to evaluate it. The second stage is that of being a student, where the purpose is understanding, and the primary task to conceptualize. Here the student is being reflective about events, characters, and themes. The third stage is that of being a critic, where the purpose is appreciation, and the primary task to formalize. Here the students explore the "howness" of the work -- the writer's craft. The fourth stage is that of being a scholar, where the purpose is expansion, the primary task reconstruction, and where the student is encouraged to regard the text from a particular critical perspective. While Milner sees this as a stage theory, and by implication hierarchical in nature, we feel that the "stages" may equally be interpreted as stances that readers can adopt at different times according to their purpose for reading. If, as Milner argues, we want students to develop the capability of reading in all four stages, or as we prefer to think, to adopt all four stances, then we needed to provide our teachers with the opportunity to do this as well. However, it may be that the fourth stage (scholar) needs to be reinterpreted for elementary school children, since it is probably inappropriate to talk of developing young children's understanding from a particular critical perspective in terms of literary theory. A non-literary critical stance may be appropriate, however, e.g. being critical of the text

as a source of information. This led us to the idea of exploring literature in the context of the social studies curriculum.

The use of literature in social studies has often been recommended (Davis & Hunter, 1990; Sanacore, 1990) as a motivator and a way of personalizing learning. In structuring the learning experience for our teachers, we decided to focus on children's literature about the westward expansion in the United States since this is a popular topic and there are many available resources for students to consult about this historical period. We expected that if asked to be a "historian" teachers could develop a scholarly stance to the books from the point of view of historical accuracy and authenticity.

The questions we hoped to address in our study, therefore, were:

1. Do teachers in cooperative literature discussion groups display a range of responses that reflect different stances?
2. Do role assignments in cooperative groups contribute to or impair literature discussions?
3. When reading historical fiction in cooperative groups, do teachers learn about the history of the westward migration in the United States?
4. Do teachers in cooperative literature discussion groups develop understandings of how to use literature with children?

## Method

### Subjects

The subjects were 24 graduate students enrolled in a class on

the reading/writing connection. There were 9 secondary school teachers and 15 elementary teachers.

Procedures

The teachers were randomly assigned to six groups of four. Each group read one book about the westward expansion in four sessions over a two week period. They met each session in cooperative groups as part of their graduate class to talk about their book for 40-45 minutes. The roles assigned in the groups were discussion leader, vocabulary researcher, historian, and educational commentator. The member roles and the daily procedures are described in Appendix A. Each group discussion was audiotaped over the four sessions, making a total of 24 taped discussions. After the last class, students completed a survey asking them to respond to statements designed to evaluate their response to the cooperative grouping process, to discussing the literature, and asking if they intended to use a similar process in their own classes.

Materials

Six books about the westward migration were selected from recommended booklists. Several more were considered and discarded as being poor literature or too difficult to obtain. An annotated bibliography of the six books selected is included in Appendix A.

Each participant was given a response log divided into four sections. Each section had space in which to write a summary of the action, a personal reaction to what they had read, a prediction of what would occur in the next part of the book, and for them to

complete their assigned role for that week.

Analysis

The audio-tapes, logs, and survey provided a plethora of data. After initially reading all the logs and listening to the tapes, it was decided to attempt to answer our questions by selecting what at first appeared to be a "good" group and a "poor" group in relation to the extent and nature of the discussions and responses. The two groups read Beyond the Divide (Lasky, 1983) and Wilderness Bride (Johnson and Johnson, 1962). Comparisons and contrasts could then be made in qualitative terms. Both researchers listened to each segment of discussion several times, and decided between them the nature of the stance being taken, which factors seemed to contribute to or impair the discussion, and the nature of the learning that was occurring. Sections of discussion were transcribed, and compared to the logs for clarification. Responses for the two groups were examined in detail for support of the initial analysis. The tapes and logs of a third group, who read White Captives (Lampman, 1977), were examined in less detail to provide confirmation of similar occurrences and behaviors. Additionally, the answers from the survey were tabulated.

Results

The results are presented in response to each of the questions asked.

1. Did teachers in cooperative literature discussion groups display a range of responses that reflected different stances?

Being able to answer this question in the affirmative is

gratifying, but hardly surprising. We would have been amazed if graduate students had been unable to adopt all of the stances, but being _able_ to adopt those stances, and actually doing so are very different. The participants usually adopted the _reader_ and _student_ stances to the book as literature, with occasional _critical_ comments. Not all groups were equally sophisticated in the nature of their responses. Factors such as the expertise of the group members, and the literary content of the book seemed to impact on the discussions and the frequency with which the stances were adopted.

We found that a personal response to the stories, indicative of a _reader_ stance, was most likely to invigorate the discussion. Most commonly this occurred when the students were either reading their personal reactions from the logs, or when they were responding to the discussion leader's questions. For example, a member of the _Wilderness Bride_ (WB) group compared herself to the main character when she said "I was brought up with boys." This group in general responded very positively to the book as a "love story," but some of the liveliest discussion resulted when one member revealed that she found it "titillating." A similar incident occurred in the _White Captives_ (WC) group in response to a teenage girl character having to go bare breasted. Once one group member revealed how she had had a very personal reaction to this event, many of the others agreed and talked about the incident. Other researchers (Golden, 1986; Langer, 1989) have noted how personal digressions can lend insight and lead the group back to explore the

relationships between characters. In the Beyond the Divide (BYD) group there were also many personal responses to the story, with shock expressed at the way people behaved. However, in contrast to the two incidents mentioned above, there was little personal response expressed regarding a rape in the story. This book was probably the best piece of literature of the six, and we cannot think that the writing inhibited response. This appeared to be one occasion when the structure of the cooperative group mediated against open discussion by allowing one person (the discussion leader) to control the agenda.

Drawing a boundary between a reader stance, and a student stance proved difficult in relation to these teachers. Personal response to the story led to discussion of characters and events and vice versa (as the incidents noted above suggest). What was rewarding was to listen to how discussion could often stretch and develop new insights into characters' motivations and actions. The BYD group members were excellent at referring to the text to clarify and extend their understandings. One example is when discussion clarified why the temperaments of the two major protagonists had been a reason for a "shunning" in an Amish community, and had led to their decision to leave and go west. Another is when a student used the word "courageous" to describe a character, and discussion of events clarified and extended why that description was appropriate. The WB group were less likely to engage in this type of discussion, but it did occur (e.g. when discussing the "hypocrisy" of the Mormon leaders). Students often

reacted to a particular character, e.g. "I really admire her", or to particular incidents, but reactions and interpretations were often as though they were discussing real events. The WC group frequently had a similar approach, almost as though they were talking about friends or acquaintances instead of fictional characters. Thus even though they were reflecting on characters and events, and meaning was occasionally being negotiated, themes were rarely explored, and a larger meaning for the book hardly addressed. This is not to say that a student stance was not adopted -- it often was -- but rather that the sophistication of the discussion was often rudimentary.

One of the surprises for us was the way in which the vocabulary that was chosen for discussion sometimes led to the adoption of a student stance by the group. This usually occurred when the word chosen applied to a character. An example was when the WC group talked about the phrase "hobbledy-hoy" and how it related to a character's insecurity and lack of coordination. In the BYD group one instance even led to a critical stance being taken when discussion of the word "nuances" triggered a reference to the fuzzy lines in the main protagonist's paintings, which in turn evoked the reaction "It will be interesting to see if her paintings become clearer as she matures." This speaker obviously understands symbolism and is sharing her expertise, and extending the group's understanding by doing so. We had included the role of vocabulary researcher for other reasons (see below), and this consequence of focusing on some vocabulary was welcome.

The WB group rarely took a critical stance, but did demonstrate some understanding of literary terms. On three particular occasions the students explored the author's craft as a group -- once when Brigham Young was somewhat artificially introduced into the story, once when there was a naive discussion of point of view, and finally at the end of the book when students were critical of the swift ending and talked of how the author had apparently "foreshadowed" events which never occurred. Our perception was that none of the members of this group had received any formal literature instruction, and this limited the range of their discussions. In contrast the tone for the BYD group was set on the first day when the first student's reaction from her log included "Kathryn Lasky's characterizations bring the people wonderfully to life. Her vocabulary and imagery are careful and thought provoking." The subsequent discussions on this and other days included talk of imagery, symbolism, point of view, author's intent, character development, figurative language, themes, and comparisons with other works. This group's members took one stance and then another. Not all the members were equally sophisticated in their literary knowledge, but understandings were negotiated and explored from differing perspectives. It must be said that Beyond the Divide was the most literary of the books, and so lent itself to this type of discussion. However, the WC group, like the WB group, rarely took a critical stance, preferring usually to become involved in the story line and empathizing with the characters.

All the groups became involved in the discussion of historical

content. We were amazed at the amount of trouble some of the teachers took to consult other sources in search of answers to questions about historical accuracy. The learning that took place will be discussed below, but it was apparent in all groups that this type of scholarly stance was enjoyed, and engaged in, by all the teachers. Of special interest to the participants was the involvement of the fictional characters in particular incidents mentioned in other sources, and there were numerous discussions of whether the fictionalized events could really have happened, and whether depictions of characters' attitudes and motivations were realistic. As one teacher put it, "I find it difficult to impose twentieth century conventions." If one of the arguments for using historical fiction is to 'make history come alive', the discussions of these teachers showed that it is a very sound argument. In addition they treated the text as an object to be validated and understood in the context of historical events, which we took to be equivalent in non-literary terms to a scholarly stance.

To summarize, while all stances were adopted at one time or other by all the groups, a critical stance was least frequently observed, except in one particular group. In this group the expertise of the participants and the literary nature of the work interacted to encourage good discussions of the author's craft.

2. Do role assignments in cooperative groups contribute to or impair literature discussions?

It has already been mentioned that the expertise held by group members impacted on the nature of the discussions. Obviously, the

expertise of the discussion leader was important in determining the focus of discussion. Sometimes this was positive, and occasionally the reverse. In general the discussion leaders were careful to ask open ended questions. We saw this as indicative of a respect for their colleagues, and hoped that a similar respect would be shown to their students in terms of asking 'authentic' questions. Having someone assigned to lead the discussion seemed to focus participants on certain issues, so that although talk jumped from one topic to another, the leader was usually able to bring it back and offer a synthesizing statement. Whether a poor discussion leader is better than no discussion leader is not clear, and there were occasions when a poor leader seemed to impair discussion, but a good discussion leader was obviously of benefit.

It was surprising how much the role of vocabulary researcher contributed to the discussion. Originally this role had been included so that the teachers could experience how vocabulary can be developed in class through group discussion. In fact, many of the words and phrases chosen enhanced discussion of the characters or events in the stories. Teachers in this role often selected vocabulary which was 'archaic', no longer in common use, or particular to a special group e.g. the Indians or the Mormons. By doing this they drew attention to the way the author's use of language set moods, lent authenticity, and developed themes. Occasionally a person in this role merely identified vocabulary and gave a meaning. Discussion never resulted from this approach, in contrast to when the word was identified and considered in the

context of the sentence and the story. Thus the fact of assigning a role cannot guarantee discussion. Rather, discussion resulted from the interpretation given to the role.

The role of the historian contributed to some of the most animated discussions. Discussion resulting from the historian's contributions provided a richer context for interpretation of the story. For example, one historian gave a long account of the beginnings of Mormonism, and then went back to talk about the story, confirming the accuracy of details. In general, there was careful use of resources, and historians exhibited behaviors that we want to see occurring in classrooms. They were researching the period and relating their findings back to the book. Discussions resulting from the role of educational consultant were not literary in nature, and will be dealt with below.

Group dynamics were often interesting, and the reactions of participants to some group members may have reflected personality conflicts. However, we were impressed at how non-confrontational the discussions were, and how, as the teachers negotiated meaning and understanding, they supported and affirmed each others' contributions. We never heard anyone say "I disagree", even when subsequent responses showed that there was disagreement. We often heard confirming statements such as, "Wonderful research!" Conversation was never monopolized by one person, and we feel the role structure contributed to this. The concept of cooperation had been discussed in class, and students were asked to monitor how they performed as a group. Even so, the degree of support was remarkable.

One of the questions on the survey (administered at the end of the four sessions), asked if the teachers thought that the role assignments helped with their understanding and enjoyment of the novel. All but one of the respondents said that the roles enhanced their understanding. This confirms what teachers have told us at other times -- that taking different roles helps them adopt different perspectives.

At the end of each of the first three sessions each participant predicted what would occur next. This proved to be another opportunity for discussion, and the sharing of predictions often served as a synthesizing experience and provided extra insights on the personal viewpoints of each reader. From this and the discussions in general, the teachers came to understand the personal nature of response to literature. We regard this as important in terms of their own approach to literature in their classrooms. Marshall (1989) found that literature discussion in secondary schools was dominated by the teacher. Walmsley and Walp (1989) noted that the goal of guided reading of literature in elementary schools appeared to be skills instruction. Our teachers experienced and learned about an alternative to these approaches that emphasized personal response. In general, therefore, role assignments and particular tasks did seem to contribute to literature discussions for these teachers.

3. When reading historical fiction in cooperative groups, do teachers learn about the history of the westward migration in the United States?

(3)

Not only did the teachers learn about the westward migration, they found inconsistencies in the fiction that they read. For example, in Wilderness Bride a reference to the Mormon's drinking tea was found to be inaccurate. Also a basic premise of the book -- that Mormons were opposed to the use of medicine -- was not confirmed through research by more than one historian. All the groups brought in maps to trace the routes taken by the stories' characters. Topics not addressed directly by the stories were also explored, e.g. interactions of whites and Indians, the history of Mormonism, the nature of the Oregon Trail and how it has been misrepresented in movies and on television. What was apparent was that a lot of learning occurred, and the participants' understanding of the westward migration was enhanced through interaction with fiction.

4. Do teachers in cooperative literature discussion groups develop understandings of how to use literature with children?

Responses on the survey suggested that all the teachers in this class intended to try cooperative groups for literature study in their own classrooms. They were also enthusiastic about using historical fiction in social studies. Some teachers chose to read one or more of the books being read by the other groups, and others commented that they had "no idea" that books like this were available for children. All these reactions confirmed that this was a valuable learning experience for them.

The 'educational consultants' came up with some exciting and interesting ideas for using the books in the classroom. These included both different themes to explore and specific activities for the students. The teachers amply demonstrated that their use of

literature would be motivating and thought provoking.

## Conclusions

Teachers in this study learned about the use of literature and cooperative groups in the classroom. Their exposure to literature led to an understanding of possibilities for its use in social studies. They also learned how personal response to literature can be a powerful motivator for reading and learning. They adopted stances to the books which showed their personal involvement with the stories (reader), understanding of characters, events, and themes (student), the authors' craft (critic), and the book as an object in relation to other sources of historical information (scholar). The only disturbing issue was the low frequency with which a critical stance was adopted.

If teachers are naive concerning literary analysis, as most of these teachers seemed to be, then they will be unable to impart such knowledge to their students. Zancanella (1991) found that teachers' own interactions with literature impacted on how they used it in the classroom and the focus of their instruction. Frequently, an approach which emphasized vicarious involvement conflicted with a "school" approach focusing on comprehension and the use of literary terms. He argues that the school curriculum fails to take advantage of teachers' own knowledge. We suggest that teachers need to develop their own literary knowledge in order to be able to extend their students' understandings. Duffy (1990) argues that teachers' conceptual understanding of the subject matter and their "conceptually-sound and theoretically-eclectic responses to students' emerging understandings" (p. vi) are the key to effective teaching. Many of the teachers in this study did not

demonstrate a sound conceptual understanding of literary analysis, and this may affect the effectiveness of their teaching. Nevertheless, the amount of learning that occurred in the class was tremendous in terms of students being motivated to use literature in the curriculum, understanding personal response, cooperative grouping, and the history of the westward migration. We would recommend other instructors of college classes to attempt similar projects.

Finally, we recommend that instructors who use groups in their classrooms should audiotape and listen to the discussions. We learned so much more from listening to the tapes than we did by listening at the time. We learned more about the students, about personal response, about the dynamics of cooperative groupings, and about our own instruction.

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## APPENDIX A

### COOPERATIVE GROUP MEMBER ROLES

DISCUSSION LEADER
Prepares questions to begin discussion about interesting aspects of the story. The Discussion Leader should make sure that every group member participates and monitor the time to complete daily procedures in a 30-minute time frame.

VOCABULARY RESEARCHER
Discusses the meaning and usage of new vocabulary, interesting terms, phrases in the context of the story.

HISTORIAN
Consults non-fiction sources (for children) to verify the accuracy of information in the story regarding things such as geographical details, chronology, accuracy of information regarding characters based on real historical personages.

EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT
Discusses implications for teaching the novel and/or using cooperative grouping in the classroom.

### DAILY PROCEDURES

Day 1 - Form groups, distribute books and journals, explain procedures.
Each group decides on number of pages to read for each class to complete the book in four sessions. Each person in the group is responsible for taking a different role on each of the four days.

Days 2,3,4 - Each group member is responsible for coming to class having completed the reading and prepared to fulfill her role for the day.

Procedures (35 minute sessions):

1. Discussion Leader reads her Summary of the Action
2. All group members read their Reactions.
3. Each member completes her daily task, beginning with the Discussion Leader, Vocabulary Researcher, Historian and Educational Consultant.
4. Group members share their predictions for the next reading.
5. Complete and discuss Self/Group Process Evaluation.

Day 5 - Same as days 2,3,4. Additionally, each group needs to develop a plan for sharing their novel with the class on day 6.

Day 6 - Each group will share their novel with the whole class.

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HISTORICAL FICTION: THE WESTWARD MIGRATION

Frazier, N. L. (1973). Stout-Hearted Seven. NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
The Sager family, including seven children, travel to Oregon in spite of Mrs. Sager's protests. The trip is arduous, and both parents die. The children are farmed out to various families, but are finally taken in by Dr. and Mrs. Whitman.

Johnson, A. and Johnson, E. (1962). Wilderness Bride. NY: Harper and Row.
Corey, a young Mormon girl is betrothed so she can live with the boy's family when her father goes to fight the war against Mexico. Corey travels west to New Zion, Utah with the family when the Mormons were forced to leave Nauvoo, Illinois. After experiencing the rigidity of the Mormon community, Corey and her betrothed decide to go out on their own.

Lampman, E. (1977). Bargain Bride. NY: Atheneum.

A young girl is betrothed to a much older man so he can claim extra land in the Oregon territory. After the man dies, the fifteen-year-old girl decides to stay on his farm by herself rather than return to her harsh relatives. The girl befriends an Indian woman and challenges local views about Indians.

Lampman, E. (1977). White Captives. NY: Atheneum.

Two Mormon sisters are captured by Navaho Indians who kill the rest of their family as they were travelling west. The girls live as slaves and eventually are traded to another tribe. One of the sisters dies and the other is eventually reunited with an older brother who had survived the family's massacre.

Lasky, K. (1983). Beyond the Divide. NY: Macmillan.

After Meribah Simon's father has been shunned by their Amish community, she and her father leave their home in search of a better life in the west. The adversity of the trip affects the people in the wagon train. Meribah's friend is raped and commits suicide. As the journey becomes perilous, Meribah and her sick father are left behind to die. Meribah's courage keeps her alive and she grows in her understanding of humanity and who she is.

Murrow, L. (1987). West Against the Wind. NY: Holiday House.

Abigail Parker is travelling west with her mother and sister to join her father in California. Members of the wagon train experience hunger, illness, and the death of many in the group. When the train is stranded in the Donner Pass, Abby gets help. Finally, she is reunited with her father.